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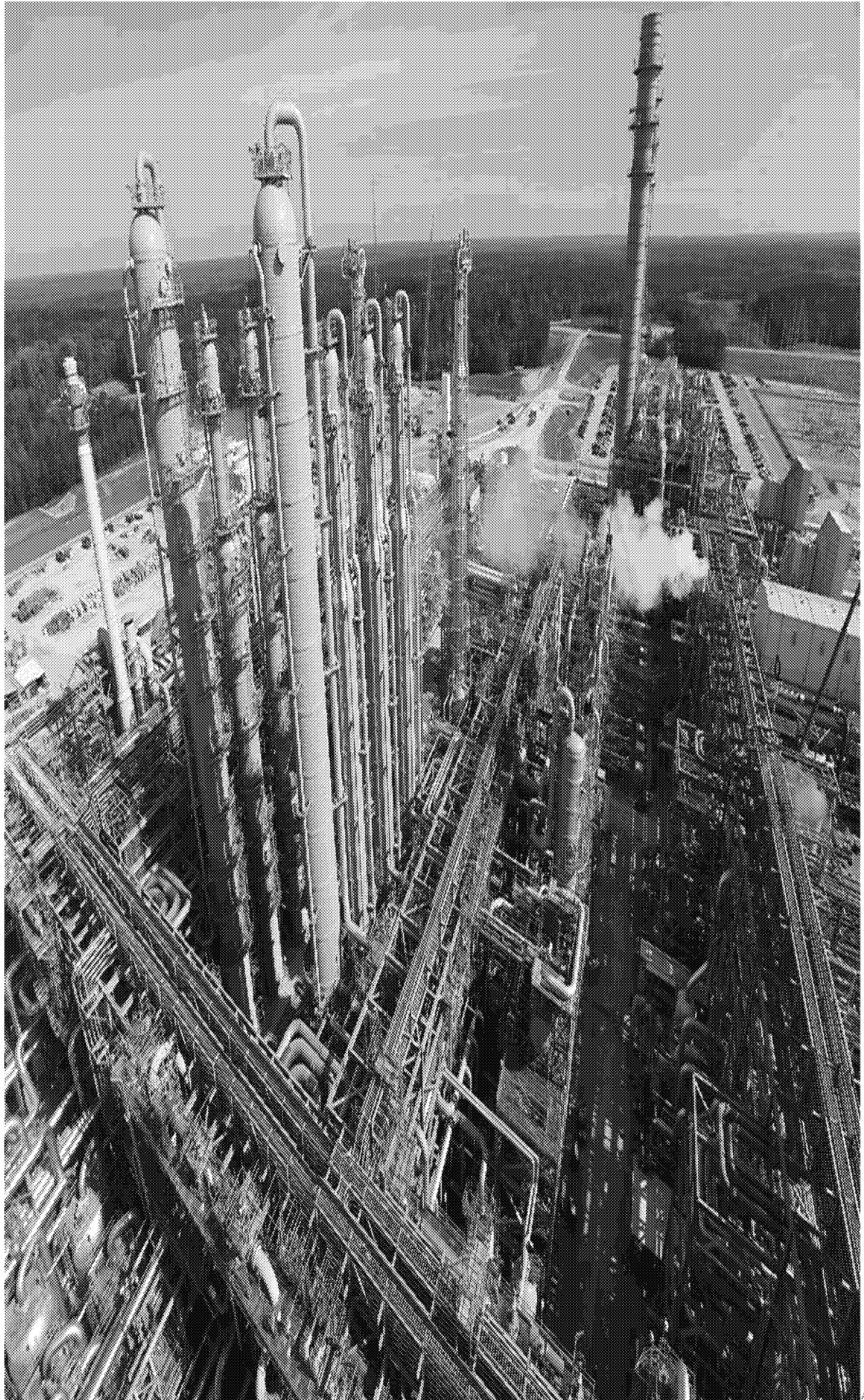
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Subject: FW: Carbon capture cash in infrastructure bill splits climate advocates

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Subject: Carbon capture cash in infrastructure bill splits climate advocates

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Carbon capture cash in infrastructure bill splits climate advocates

BY BEN LEFEBVRE | 08/09/2021 05:00 AM EDT



The inclusion of billions of dollars for controversial carbon capture technology in the bipartisan infrastructure bill is dividing traditional climate allies, pitting progressives who argue the measure prolongs the use of fossil fuels against others who see it as a necessary tool to achieve ambitious U.S. climate goals.

The nearly \$550 billion in new spending in the package includes \$12.5 billion for large-scale deployment of carbon capture, a technology that strips pollutants from the smokestacks of oil refineries, cement plants and steel works before they hit the atmosphere. Industry analysts say those dollars would help bring a technology long proven overseas into the U.S. mainstream.

Democrats have warmed to the idea of carbon capture technology in recent years. Sen. Joe Manchin, a centrist Democrat from West Virginia, included funds for carbon capture in the bill he wrote that became a basis for the bipartisan infrastructure package. White House climate envoy John Kerry in June called it “a key tool” in reducing emissions from heavy industry. His comment came after the United Nations in March said the technology was “needed urgently” to ensure countries met their carbon neutrality goals.

“Until we know we’re safe, we need to deploy every likely method to undo the carbon harm we have wrought,” said Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), a progressive lawmaker who has backed climate legislation for years, in an email to POLITICO. “Carbon capture complements both the robust emissions reduction program that we seek and the clean energy investments we intend to fund. ...To keep global temperatures from the danger zone beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, every tool has to be available.”

But some progressive and environmental groups continuing to fight against it.

Lauren Maunus, advocacy director for progressive group Sunrise Movement, said the funds would mainly benefit the oil industry, which is expected to be one of the key players in moving the captured gas and either storing it underground or using it to force more oil out of aging wells. Exxon Mobil in February announced it was starting a subsidiary devoted to developing carbon capture.

“It’s outrageous that this bill includes so many work arounds to extend the life of the fossil fuel industry, all while our country is on fire,” Maunus said.

Illustrating the squeeze Democratic lawmakers find themselves in is a recent crossfire of letter-writing from interest groups. Labor unions joined with energy companies in one letter to urge Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and their Republican counterparts to continue backing the technology and increase a tax credit paid to companies who store CO₂ underground. Meanwhile, hundreds of environmental groups co-signed a letter to Democratic leaders calling carbon capture “a dangerous distraction” in the fight against climate change.

“We think if anything CCS should be reserved for ‘last mile’ decarbonization only where there aren’t alternatives,” said Bronwen Tucker, research analyst at letter signatory Oil Change International, in an email. “The \$12 billion+ of CCUS projects in the infrastructure bill are there in place of many already-proven, less risky, and more cost-effective climate solutions that desperately need funding.”

Industry researchers argue carbon capture technology is proven to work. Reducing carbon emissions on the scale needed to avert the worst effects of climate change will require removing the carbon emissions from iron and steel works, concrete factories and other energy-intensive industries that can't yet run on alternatives to oil and gas, they say.

A carbon capture pilot project run outside Houston by Petra Nova, while having experienced some setbacks, including being forced to shut down during Hurricane Harvey in 2017, was generally considered a success while it was running, several researchers told POLITICO. Petra Nova suspended the project last year after blaming a drop in oil prices amid the pandemic for making the relatively small project unprofitable.

What is now needed are hubs where the technology can be paired with heavy industry, and the billions allocated in the infrastructure bill should be able to put the carbon capture industry on solid footing, according to the researchers.

"This is a good down payment" on carbon capture, said Julio Friedmann, a senior research scholar at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy and head of consulting firm Carbon Wrangler. "If you're serious about climate you need it."

But another pressure point between Democrats and progressive groups could emerge in the infrastructure bill's inclusion of \$2.1 billion to develop infrastructure to transport carbon dioxide. That most likely will go toward building pipelines to carry the gas from places it's being captured to caverns along the Gulf Coast and other areas to be injected and stored.

The thought of new pipelines has not gone down well with groups that celebrated President Joe Biden's killing of the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline and are still fighting to end pipeline projects Enbridge and others are building.

Jane Kleeb, the chair of the Nebraska Democratic Party and longtime activist against pipeline projects, said environmental groups had been surprised to see the money for carbon capture included in the bill. She worried that the new CO₂ pipelines will trigger the type of eminent domain and environmental safety fights that have embroiled the pipeline industry for decades.

"I am definitely not happy with it," Kleeb said. "We have no idea what happens if one of these pipelines leaks or explodes. Fossil fuel companies are going to get this money and in the end rural and tribal communities are going to be the ones shouldering the risk."

But pipelines are exactly what's needed to give carbon capture the sort of scale it needs to become viable, said Howard Herzog, senior research engineer at the MIT Energy Initiative. Herzog said the technology is well proven, pointing to large-scale carbon capture activity in the United Kingdom and Netherlands as the sort of projects U.S. environmental groups should keep in mind as they focus on combating emissions at home.

"It makes sense," Herzog said in an interview. "If you're going to build pipelines, you really go to the point of good economies of scale."

Ultimately, companies and the government will have to use some money to engage with communities near the pipelines and storage areas, said Volker Sick, mechanical

engineering professor at the University of Michigan and director of the Global CO₂ Initiative. More public outreach and technological testing has to be done to assuage the fears of people in the Midwest, Gulf Coast and other regions that will need to carve out space for more pipelines or sites where the CO₂ will be injected into the ground.

“These regional hubs make sense,” Sick said in an interview. “But look, nobody likes pipelines. Nobody. So building public trust and really demonstrating this at large scale is I think part of what needs to be done with that funding.”

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